

Verbal Behavior: *Child's Talk*

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A book appeared concurrently with the final volume of Skinner's autobiography, and it covers much of the same period of time in the development of recent psychology. *In Search of Mind* (1983a) by Jerome Bruner is an interesting contrast to Skinner's (1983) *A Matter of Consequences*—along a whole range of dimensions not the least of which is autobiographical style. But it was a "similarity" of sorts that most intrigued me about Bruner's book. Chapter 9 is titled "The World and Words" and tells the story of Bruner's work on language acquisition in very young children. Aside from announcing the failure of the Chomskian account of language development, Bruner constructs his view of how children come to use language based upon actual observations of children and mothers talking together. He says:

Each step of the way, the mother incorporated whatever competencies the child had already developed. . . . As he gained competence, she would raise her criterion. Almost any vocalization the child might offer at the start would be accepted. But each time the child came closer to the standard form, she would hold out for it. . . . When he switched from babbling to offering shorter vocalization as 'labels' . . . she would no longer accept babbles but would insist on the shorter 'names' (Bruner, 1983a, p. 171).

Such passages were provocative enough to lead me to the more complete account of Bruner's work contained in the recently published book, *Child's Talk* (1983b). Before I describe its content, I should note that not all sections of Chapter 9 from *In Search of Mind* were so provocative. Some were just old hat, or downright annoying. Listen to Bruner describe his reaction to the famous 1959 review of Skinner's (1957) *Verbal Behavior*.

Chomsky's review of Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* was electric: Noam is at his best, mercilessly out for the kill, daring, brilliant, on the side of the

angels. The reductionism of learning-theory explanations of language was 'exposed' as a kind of anti-intellectual sham, almost as a conspiracy to denigrate human rationality. The marshaling of linguistic evidence was devastatingly on target. I felt like cheering when I finished it (p. 159).

Child's Talk reports on the language development of two children, Richard and Jonathan, from five and three months of age to twenty-four months and eight months respectively. Half-hour video and audio recordings were made in each child's home on a fortnightly schedule.

I want to emphasize the general approach taken by Bruner rather than any specific outcomes though these would not be without interest for behavior analysts. Bruner traces the source of his approach, at least conceptually, to John Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein, both of whom focussed on the use of language—which is termed "pragmatics" by Austin and introduced in his 1962 book, *How to do Things with Words* (another interesting set of William James Lectures).

The two chapters of Bruner's which contain the most data are "The Growth of Reference" and "The Development of Request." If these seem vaguely familiar as fundamental categories of talk, my point in discussing *Child's Talk* will not be missed. The data presented are descriptive. One table on child labelling (Table 4.3, p. 81), for example, gives the percentage of total labels devoted to common nouns for whole objects, parts of objects, proper names, etc. Another table (5.1, p. 94) classifies the different types of requests made by Jonathan and Richard at various ages. These are classified as requests for near and visible objects, for remote or absent objects, for joint role enactment, as in

playing peek-a-boo with mother, and request for supportive action.

What Bruner did was study, in the single subject, the emergence of talk. The object of such talk is on the one hand "to get somebody to deliver the goods (these he terms requests), and on the other hand, names for things or events (these he terms references)." In either case, the most frequent listener (usually the mother) is clearly acknowledged as playing a critical role in producing and maintaining the talk. What is also not to be missed in this work and others like it, is the general shift, though one not yet complete, toward making the subject matter of one's investigation talk, the effects which maintain it, and the circumstances that control it.

There are a number of ways in which Bruner and his students' efforts do not fit well with a behavior analysis, though these are largely the meta-descriptive terms employed, rather than anything about the data, or the method of collecting it. The latter, after all consists of no more than noting what the child says, what the mother says, and how these two are related to each other and to environmental circumstances and nonverbal actions of both child and parent. Thus, I am not claiming that there is by any means a 100 percent mapping between the literature on the development of requests (a literature much more extensive than just the work of Bruner), and the class of verbal responses called mands: but I am convinced

that there is enough of a connection to make further reading worthwhile and to perhaps provide some useful data for advancing our analysis of manding. Conversely, the detailed analysis of "requests" made in *Verbal Behavior* provides a wider range of distinctions than currently available in the "request" literature. The related studies by Bruner of how mothers teach their children to label objects, circumstances, and states of affairs is an approximation to tacting even though the phenomenon is treated as an instance of reference.

In none of the recent studies which attempt to describe how individual children in the natural environment develop the behavior of requesting and naming is the potential contribution of *Verbal Behavior* toward this effort acknowledged. In *Child Talk*, *Verbal Behavior* is dismissed as the final product in a series of "mindless" theories of language traceable to St. Augustine. I only hope such nonsense will not discourage us from examining and possibly contributing to the literature on requesting and naming.

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